

Low-stakes Writing and Speaking Activities for Large Courses. Some general examples.

Informal low-stakes writing and speaking activities are especially helpful in large courses because they ensure frequent active learning opportunities for all students without demanding individual feedback or, in many cases, any grading action at all.

Engaging students in writing- and speaking-to-learn activities might look, for example, like any of the following popular and infinitely adaptable activities. Though you may sometimes choose to read or respond, low-stakes writing can produce learning without the instructor ever seeing it.

Focused free-writing/speaking. In class, students are given a specific objective to complete through private writing, usually in 2-10 minutes. Alternately, students can discuss the prompt briefly with a classmate. For example,

- **To review or summarize** (e.g., “Summarize the main idea of the reading for today,” “write an explanation of this technical concept that your middle-school-aged relative would understand”)
- **To ground discussion** (e.g., “Describe something that confused you in the reading for today,” “Identify the most—and least—convincing evidence the writer uses to support their claim in this article”)
- **To practice disciplinary skills** (e.g., “Write a few sentences to explain what this data tells us about profitability” or “describe at least one benefit and one drawback of the proposed policy”)
- **To generate ideas** (e.g., “List as many potential applications of this technique as you can,” “thinking back through the cases we’ve read this semester, where does today’s lecture shed new light on a problem we’ve previously discussed?”)
- **To prepare for next steps** (e.g., “Name one thing from today’s class you should review before the exam,” “Document two takeaways that could apply to your upcoming case analysis”)

“Think, Pair, Share.” 1) Students write in response to a prompt, then 2) discuss their responses in pairs, and finally, 3) pairs are prompted to share takeaways, possibly leading to whole-class discussion. Note: this one’s challenging online! We include it because the payoff of the sequence of private writing, paired conversation, and group shareout is so great. It’s possible to do using Zoom breakout rooms or private paired chats.

Temperature Taking. Collecting a very quick piece of in-class writing from students is a simple way to assess learning in progress, particularly in large classes. For instance, you might prompt students to write a single question they have at the close of a lecture. Collect them on index cards in-person, or via Zoom chat or Google Forms online. A quick flip through the responses then offers a broad assessment of the class.

Low-stakes Writing and Speaking Activities for Large Courses. Some generalized examples, cont'd.

Thesis Statement Drafting. In just a few minutes, students can practice generating and articulating an argument. Ask them to respond to a reading, or make a recommendation based on a case presented in class.

Short Summary Presentations. Students can deliver these orally at the start of class on a rotating basis, providing them with an opportunity to practice concise content delivery (e.g., “In two minutes, introduce a new concept from this week’s assigned textbook chapter, explaining its most important elements in your own words.”)

Process reflections. Students are assigned to share descriptions of their thinking process in solving a problem or approaching a technical challenge. These can be collected as short write-ups, presented orally in small groups, or even recorded as short screencasts with voice talking over a scratch pad, spreadsheet, or piece of code. Students can observe how several other students approached similar problems, prompting further reflection.

Short oral communication tasks. Students record themselves performing a brief task (e.g. explaining a concept, making a pitch, delivering challenging news, presenting a meeting agenda, sharing an analysis) and post on a platform such as VOCAT. For homework or as part of asynchronous classwork in an online course, have students watch group members’ videos and write short responses, feedback, or questions, or have them share feedback directly with each other.

Dialogue writing. Assigning dialogue writing is a lively way to encourage students to inhabit multiple positions and perspectives while bypassing the formality of academic prose, even allowing them to express and work through doubt and confusion. For example, students might write dialogues between

- two theorists trying to convince each other of their positions or looking for common ground
- themselves and a friend in the course who is struggling to understand a concept for an upcoming exam
- co-managers debating the best way to approach a particular organizational challenge

Paired discussion assignments. Students can be assigned to complete paired discussion activities outside of class—especially useful in asynchronous remote courses. They meet on the phone or another voice-enabling platform, follow a clear set of prompts, and write up short reflections on their conversations, including about something they learned from their partner.

Low-stakes Writing Examples for Quantitative Courses. Excerpted from *Student Writing in the Quantitative Disciplines: A Guide for College Faculty*, by Patrick Bahls.

Freewriting to develop an intuitive description of a technical fact or theorem. Students understand technical ideas more fully when they are asked to put them into their own words. Freewrites offer students the perfect place to begin that paraphrasing process. Students can be asked to freewrite about why lasers work, about what they might infer from a particular set of statistical data, or about why the Mean Value Theorem ultimately makes sense. Five minutes spent in freewriting on these or any other abstract concept will help students form more concrete versions of the concept in their minds.

Dialogue writing for a statistics course. “Your friend is distraught. It’s the night before your statistics exam, and she still doesn’t understand the difference between stratified sampling and cluster sampling. ‘I don’t see why you need to use one or the other at all,’ she tells you. ‘Why don’t you just pick your population completely at random?’ Write a dialogue in which you help your friend see the differences between these methods of sampling, illustrating the differences with specific examples where appropriate.”

Estimation essay for a database design course. “You have been hired to design a database to track personnel data for a company with approximately 2,000 employees. Ten fields are to be maintained for each employee. Derive an estimate for the space you would need to store the necessary data in a heap, explaining each step of the process you use to derive your estimate. Then repeat the exercise, assuming you would store the data in a clustered index instead.”

“Doubting and believing” exercise in a mathematical finance course. “To prepare for our next class, select one of the pricing models we have discussed during the past week. Write two responses to this model, one as a believer and one as a doubter. In your believing response, highlight at least two consequences you can derive by assuming your model’s truth. In your doubting response, attack your model by pointing out at least two weak points in the model. We will use your responses as a basis for discussion in class.”